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SUBJECT: A REAL LIVE CAMPAIGN SEASON, AS BOMBINGS SEEM QUICKLY
FORGOTTEN

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Sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) Armenia's campaign environment has ratcheted into high gear, with a vibrant rainbow of political ads posted everywhere you look. The April 12 bombings of two Prosperous Armenia (PA) offices (ref A) seem quickly to have disappeared from political relevance, after virtually all parties condemned the attacks. Opposition and government parties hold peaceful rallies without incident. Leading members of the opposition have also commented on the relative fairness of the media's coverage of the campaign. Media outlets and opposition have criticized the new prime minister for using his incumbency advantages to benefit his campaign. Several other violent incidents that have occurred appear to be based in localized conflicts, rather than a systemic effort to affect the election result. Only a slight undertone of anxiety tinges an otherwise bustling campaign season. END SUMMARY.

BOMBINGS NO BIG DEAL?

¶2. (SBU) After the initial burst of reaction, the overall tone and direction of Armenia's election campaign seems little changed. At an April 13 press conference, Prime Minister and Republican Party of Armenia (RPA) chairman Serzh Sargsian said that he did not think the recent explosions and shooting (see para 7) were connected with the election and emphasized that law-enforcement agencies have sufficient resources to prevent destabilization of the country. Echoing his April 9 interview with the Financial Times, Sargsian said the government will do its best to ensure free and fair elections, in line with its international commitments.

¶3. (SBU) Over the past ten days, leading government and opposition parties have held peaceful rallies and presented their platforms without incident. Last week, ARF Dashnaktsutyun, Orinats Yerkir and the National Unity parties all presented manifestos to the public, pledging to strengthen the rule of law and improve living standards. Hundreds of Dashnaktsutyun supporters gathered in downtown Yerevan for a peaceful rally on April 9. The opposition Impeachment Bloc also held a relatively large, peaceful rally on April 13.

¶4. (SBU) Approximately 300 Orinats Yerkir (OY) activists gathered in a conference hall in Yerevan on April 10 to attend the high-profile presentation of their party's platform. Party leader Artur

Baghdasarian complained that city authorities in Spitak refused to allow OY the use of the city's large meeting hall and overcharged for use of a much smaller facility. He also said he sent an appeal to the Central Election Commission on the "large-scale shortcomings" of the voter registration list, and hopes the lists will be corrected before May 12. He has also publicly complained that OY has been unable to buy billboard space in the best locations in various cities. On a positive note, Baghdasarian said he is generally satisfied with the media's campaign coverage and the OY platform unveiling event was held without incident.

15. (SBU) Our impression from our travels is that a vibrant and diverse range of party banners, posters, and billboards, have sprung up in every city and town across Armenia. Prosperous Armenia (PA) and then the Republicans were the first to get in on the action, but with the launch of the official campaign period, many others have jumped in. PA and RPA seem to have scored many of the best spots for themselves in advance, by posting hundreds of banners and billboards sporting only their name and logo, or a picture, without any explicit campaign messages. However, other parties' banners are very widely seen as well, as virtually every vertical surface seems to have sprouted brightly-colored campaign banners.

SERZH ON A LISTENING TOUR OF THE REGIONS

16. (SBU) Newly-appointed PM Serzh Sargsian also serves as head of RPA which, so far, has avoided organizing major public events and focused instead campaign-related T.V. advertisements. Sargsian said that the Republican Party, already in power for seven years, does not need a special election campaign and announced that he would not campaign "in the classical way." Instead Sargsian plans to "visit the regions" to learn about local problems, exercising his convenient new power of incumbency to justify extensive, ostensibly non-partisan travel, with extensive media coverage.

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17. (SBU) Opposition politicians have criticized Sargsian for violating an electoral code stipulation that media only cover official government activities of top government officials during the campaign period. To keep the visits "official," Sargsian has been careful to bring only regional and local government officials, not RPA representatives or other candidates, with him on his regional visits. He has not shied away from partisan messages, however. In a recent visit to the Aragatsotn region, he admonished voters -- who complained about the RPA incumbent parliamentarian's non-performance on their behalf -- not to assume a new member of parliament would do any better. He said anyone who promised rapid economic development in the rural regions was lying; it would take at least four years to transform the economies of Armenia's provinces. (COMMENT: We do not take seriously complaints about Sargsian's use of the bully pulpit. His use of incumbency has been mild when compared to other countries. END COMMENT)

TSARUKIAN: NOT CONCERNED ABOUT INSTABILITY

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18. (SBU) Businessman Gagik Tsarukian was swarmed by supporters at an April 10 rally to officially launch his Prosperous Armenia Party (PA) campaign. Tsarukian assured residents of the working-class Shengavit neighborhood of Yerevan that the PA will improve their lives if it wins the elections. On April 13, PA sponsored local newspapers to publish its 33-page party platform, which focuses on economic growth and development, as a paid advertisement. PA reportedly paid for a number of these newspapers to double their regular print run of that day's edition. A member of the campaign staff said the party was committed to creating thousands of jobs by reopening factories closed after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Asked to specify which factories would be reopened, the campaigner replied "whichever you want." In a recent interview with the Russian press, Tsarukian, said that he was not overly concerned

about political instability in Armenia because "Our president is very strong and is closely following the pre-election struggle. If something happens, he will strictly punish the guilty." The interview was not dated, so it is not clear if these comments were made before or after the bombings and Tsarukian has not made any statements in the Armenian press following the attacks.

OPPOSITION POSITIVE ABOUT MEDIA COVERAGE

¶9. (SBU) Artashes Geghamian, leader of the National Unity (NU) party, among the more significant opposition parties, was unexpectedly upbeat about the freedom and fairness of the polls. He said the authorities realized that the opposition will be "unable to restrain our people" if results are falsified. During an April 14 press conference, opposition People's Party leader Stepan Demirchian said that media outlets have been providing balanced coverage of the campaign and added that, so far, his party had not faced particular problems campaigning.

ALL POLITICS IS LOCAL: THE VERY SPECIAL ECHMIADZIN

¶10. (SBU) Despite the peaceful rallies in Yerevan, some local races have been plagued by individualized violence. For example, tension rose in the troubled district of Echmiadzin last week when unknown assailants reportedly opened fire on candidate Hakob Hakobian's empty car and burned down the campaign office of opposition candidate Susanna Harutiunian. Both candidates were running against government-backed retired army general Seyran Saroyan and accused Saroyan of being behind the attacks. Saroyan vehemently denied any involvement.

¶11. (SBU) On April 10, the local first instance court controversially annulled Hakobian and Harutinunian's registration based on allegations by a fourth candidate that they had used forged voters' signatures to register. (NOTE: Hakobian has been accused of tax evasion in the past and his aide was arrested for allegedly kidnapping the father of a local resident who accused Hakobian of forging signatures. END NOTE.) The court's decision essentially ensures Saroyan's victory in electoral district #19 south of Yerevan. Hakobian and Harutiunian condemned the decision as politically motivated. Many political observers consider the conflict (particularly between Hakobian and Saroyan) to be typical of Echmiadzin politics, however, and not necessarily reflective of a national trend.

...AND GYUMRI

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¶12. (SBU) The Armenian police, the National Security Service and the Prosecutor-General launched a joint criminal investigation into the armed attack on the mayor of Gyumri Vartan Ghukasian (Ref B), but have made no arrests so far and have said nothing to illuminate the motivations for the attack. Law enforcement official continue to proclaim the investigation a top priority. Prevailing opinion holds that the assassination attempt more likely arose from Gyumri-based criminal interests, than from anything to do with election politics.

ACTING DEFENSE MINISTER SPEAKS OUT

¶13. (SBU) Acting Defense Minister, chief of the general staff General Mikhail Harutyunian, spoke out to assure Armenians that the Armenian military is well-prepared, and would be ready to repel any opportunistic attack from Azerbaijan during the Armenian campaign season. In the absence of any clear external reason for the comment, his remark may serve mostly to remind voters of national security concerns, and perhaps subtly turn their thoughts to which

party and candidate may have the strongest national security credentials.

COMMENT:

¶13. (SBU) Five days after the April 12 bombings, and in the wake of other violent incidents, what surprises us is how little these events have changed the overall tone and vibrancy of the campaign. The more significant opposition leaders seem to have jumped wholeheartedly into the fray. Opposition complaints are mostly of the politics-as-usual variety, and talk of boycotts has died down. To every outward appearance, we have a real, live election campaign going on.

GODFREY